



Discovery of neon gas by William Ramsay – October 2, 1852

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General Note

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William Ramsay was born in Glasgow on October 2, 1852, the son of William Ramsay, C.E. and Catherine, née Robertson. He was a nephew of the geologist, Sir Andrew Ramsay. He was the Scottish scientist who discovered the noble gases. These gases are argon, neon, krypton and xenon. These gases along with helium and radon formed a new set of elements. For this discovery, Ramsay was awarded the Noble Prize in 1904. Ramsay has made many contributions to the field of chemistry. His contributions touch the fields of organic chemistry and physical chemistry including stoichiometry, thermodynamics, molecular weights, density, surface tension and the critical states of liquids & vapours. Ramsay liberated another inert gas from a mineral called cleveite; this proved to be helium, previously known only in the solar spectrum. In his book *The Gases of the Atmosphere* (1896), Ramsay showed that the positions of helium and argon in the periodic table of elements indicated that at least three more noble gases might exist. Working with the British chemist Frederick Soddy in 1903, Ramsay demonstrated that helium (together with a gaseous emanation called radon) is continually produced during the radioactive decay of radium, a discovery of crucial importance to the modern understanding of nuclear reactions. In 1910, using tiny samples of radon, Ramsay proved that it was a sixth noble gas, and he provided further evidence that it was formed by the emission of a helium nucleus from radium. This research demonstrated the high degree of experimental skill that Ramsay had developed, but it also marked his last notable scientific contribution. He was the first to write textbooks based on the periodic classification of elements: *A System of Inorganic Chemistry* and *Elementary Systematic Chemistry for the Use of Schools and Colleges*. In 1881 Ramsay married Margaret, the daughter of George Stevenson Buchanan. They had one son and one daughter. His recreations were languages and travelling. He was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society in 1888 and knighted in 1902; and he served as president of the Chemical Society (1907–09) and the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1911). He continued to write on war-related matters until his death. He died at High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, on July 23, 1916 from nasal cancer at the age of 63 and was buried in Hazlemere Parish church.